

Original Research

Towards Inclusive School Facilities in South Africa: Primary School Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract

School facilities are critical for promoting inclusive education. This study aimed to investigate teachers' perceptions of the inclusiveness of school facilities in a full-service primary school in South Africa. This research study used a qualitative approach and an interpretivist paradigm. The study used purposive sampling to select four teachers from a full-service primary school in Ba-Phalaborwa's Lulekani Circuit, in the Mopani District of Limpopo. Data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews and non-participant observations. The findings of the study showed that participants defined inclusive school facilities in line with inclusive education policies. However, teachers perceived their toilets as not inclusive and classrooms to be merely partially inclusive. While previous studies have researched different aspects of inclusive education especially teachers' perceptions of inclusive curricula, little has been done on the inclusiveness of classrooms and toilets from the perception of teachers. The study recommends that school management and the governing body in the sampled school and those with similar problems prioritise projects to modify some of the facilities to cater for diverse learners. It is also recommended that schools in similar situations collaborate with local community members to raise funds or provide services to restructure classrooms and toilets to be more inclusive.

Keywords: full-service school; accessibility; inclusive education; inclusive schools; school facilities

Introduction

The South African education system exhibited severe disparities of inequality based on race and gender during the apartheid era. These inequalities continue to riddle the current educational system, with some schools thriving more than others due to unequal distribution of resources. Some of these inequalities are experienced based on other differences, such as belonging to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Queer, and others (LGBTQ+) community, having different religious beliefs, or having physical or learning disabilities. In a bid to address these challenges, the South African government mandated that mainstream schools accommodate all learners, allowing them to learn together despite their differences. The Constitution of South Africa ([Republic of South Africa, 1996](#)) also states that no learner should be discriminated against based on differences such as race, gender, background, (dis) abilities, or beliefs, among other differences.

Disability can be understood in various ways, including the medical model and the social model. These models influence how school facilities are designed. The medical model views disability mainly as an individual impairment situated within the person's body or mind ([Shakespeare, 2020](#)). This implies that corrective treatment, such as therapy or placement in special schools, is required to help the child fit into existing school systems. Through this lens, school facilities may not be adjusted to be inclusive of learners with disabilities, hence learners must find alternative options. In contrast, the social model sees disability as embedded in societal and environmental barriers rather than in the person ([Hogan, 2019](#)). This model views impairment as long-term limitations of physical, sensory or cognitive functions and disability as the exclusion or disadvantage created when the physical environment fails to accommodate individual differences ([Olkin, 2002](#)). For example, in a school, no ramps, inaccessible toilets and overcrowded classrooms are viewed as structures that make it



difficult for learners with disabilities to be included. Hence, schools should redesign them to become inclusive. In line with the social model, this study views disability as a relational and contextual phenomenon and school facilities as key places where inclusion or exclusion is significantly produced.

Despite the constitutional declarations and the progressive views of disability, the exclusion of some learners continues to take place in both subtle and more vivid ways. One such way that exclusion continues to happen is through school facilities that are not inclusive of the diverse needs of learners. School facilities in this context refer to physical structures, equipment, and areas such as classrooms, libraries, sports fields, and utility systems that provide a safe and functional environment for teaching and learning (Nkuna, 2012). These facilities include toilets and classrooms, which were the focus of this study. In South Africa, the state is responsible for providing these facilities and the Department of Education (DoE), through its different officials, is responsible for ensuring that the facilities are functional and effective in their purpose. One critical requirement of functional school facilities is that they must be inclusive of the different needs of learners. This aspect forms part of efforts to implement inclusive education principles where no learner is left behind.

Increased access to education among learners with diverse needs is important for reducing socioeconomic inequality later in life. In many parts of the world, including South Africa, inclusive education has been acknowledged as the means of delivering increased educational access for all learners, including those with disabilities (Deghaye, 2021). Therefore, no school can be declared inclusive if its facilities are not inclusive. Teaching and learning can be more effective and of a higher quality if acceptable and inclusive facilities and infrastructure are in place. Imaniah and Fitria (2018) highlighted that satisfactory facilities and infrastructure need to be provided to inclusive schools for learners to enjoy learning.

Learners with special needs require special services and treatment from the surrounding environment to help them overcome obstacles in their daily activities and achieve optimal development (Azzahra et al., 2022). The functions of facilities are a vital part of the application of education. In the implementation of inclusive education, the infrastructure required is varied because learners with special needs also need some special infrastructure to enable them to easily access the learning process (Azzahra et al., 2022). Thus, this study was driven by this background to gain an understanding of teachers' perceptions of the inclusiveness of selected school facilities in their schools. Teachers are seen as the drivers at the forefront of the implementation of inclusiveness in schools. Thus, their perceptions are valuable, as how they see things can determine how they can push for change.

Aim of the Study

This study aimed to investigate teachers' perceptions of the inclusiveness of school facilities in a selected primary school. The objective of this study was to explore how teachers perceived the inclusiveness of their toilets and classrooms in terms of accommodating learners with diverse needs. This was done with the aim of making recommendations for how the facilities could be made more inclusive.

Literature Study

History of inclusive education in South Africa

The history of inclusive education can be traced back to the Salamanca conference held in 1994 in Salamanca, Spain, which was a vital occasion in the history of all-inclusive schools globally. Approximately 92 representatives of the government and around 25 international organisations attended the conference (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994). The countries' discussion and promotion of the idea of all-inclusive schooling for all learners was the key purpose of the discussions at the conference, especially for learners living with disabilities and who have special learning requirements. The conference aimed to endorse ideologies of inclusive education that advocate equal education of learners rather than discriminating against some or isolating some in a special educational environment (UNESCO, 1994).

It was based on these resolutions that countries in Africa designed policies on inclusive education that were regionally and locally relevant. The Protocol to the African Charter on the Human Rights of People Living with Disabilities (African Union, 2014) was one such product of this conference. This charter emphasised that parties would yield appropriate activities, including guidelines and lawmaking, to ensure and promote the rights and dignity of humans and people living with disabilities in African countries, without discrimination based on disabilities (African Union, 2014). Given that South

Africa was a signatory to this charter, this mandates the country to promote inclusive education in all schools.

According to [Donohue & Bornman \(2014\)](#), the exceptional history and diversity of South Africa present several complexities when it comes to implementing inclusive education. The many dissimilar ethnic and language groups in South Africa, along with the country's apartheid history and excessive poverty, contribute to a society that has many diverse thoughts. This is not only about the requirements of learners with disabilities but also about best practices and beliefs concerning how they should be educated. According to [USAID/Disability Inclusive Education Practice \(2020\)](#), over one billion people globally experience some form of disability. Children with disabilities mainly face challenges in enrolling and completing school, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where disability gaps in education are on the rise. UNESCO approximates that 90% of children with disabilities in the Global South are out of school, with less than 10% in African countries attending school [UNESCO \(2020\)](#). In South Africa, research indicates that the number of children with special needs between seven and 15 years old not enrolled in schools is about 30,000 per year and those aged 5–18 years are around 100,000 per year ([Taylor, 2025](#)). From 2022 to 2024, this number has remained steadily close to 10% per year ([Statistics South Africa, 2025](#)). Although some provinces, such as the Northern Cape and Gauteng, recorded huge decreases in the number of children with special needs not enrolled in school, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and Eastern Cape experienced a notable increase, with figures in KwaZulu-Natal almost doubling from 8.4% in 2009 to 15.7% in 2024 ([Statistics South Africa, 2025](#)). These fluctuations indicate some progress and challenges in providing access to education for children with disabilities, some of which were worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it is compulsory for learners aged between seven and 15 years to attend school, most learners living with disabilities in this age group still do not attend school.

South African Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education, building on the Inclusive Education and Training system (EWP6) ([Department of Education, 2001](#)), outlines a national strategy to attain an inclusive education system that concentrates on addressing and accommodating learners who experience different barriers to learning as far as possible in mainstream classrooms. The EWP6 outlines that inequalities in all schools, including special needs schools, must be eradicated. It aims to break the concept of special needs education and introduces the notion of barriers to learning within an inclusive education framework ([Department of Education, 2001](#)). This means formally excluded learners can learn alongside their peers who do not have barriers to learning. This then calls for the provision of resources to support such learners to compete equally with their counterparts. Such resources include, but are not limited to, school facilities like toilets and classrooms.

Building on the requirements of EWP 6, current South African policy speaks about inclusive education through more tangible practices such as the policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) of 2014, the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) Strategic Plan 2025–2030 and the 2024 Regulations on the minimum uniform norms and standards for school infrastructure. The SIAS policy aims to help teachers identify and support learners with barriers to learning to enable them to fully participate and be included in mainstream schools ([Department of Basic Education, 2014](#)). These instruments place inclusive school facilities as both an instructional and monitoring obligation, which mandate that schools provide environments which are free from barriers, equal access to support services and safe conditions for all learners. In this context, teachers' perceptions of the inclusiveness of school facilities become a core lens through which school facilities can be analysed to see their alignment with policy requirements. Furthermore, the DBE Strategic Plan 2025–2030 aims to strengthen governance, teacher capacity and learner support systems to enable schools to achieve the vision of “quality basic education for all”, including disadvantaged learners ([Department of Basic Education, 2025](#)). In the context of this study, this Plan frames teachers' perceptions as a lens through which progress on infrastructure improvements and their contribution toward inclusive education is made. The regulations relating to minimum uniform norms and standards for public school infrastructure ([Government Gazette, 2024](#)) provide mandatory norms and standards for school infrastructure, such as classrooms and sanitation spaces, to ensure that all learners are provided with a safe, functioning school environment. These regulations aim to reduce disparities in public schools and provide facilities that are accessible to all learners to promote inclusive education. Thus, teachers' experiences of facilities available in their schools can be useful in confirming or disconfirming the inclusiveness of these facilities for all learners, including those with disabilities.

Inclusive Education and Inclusive School Facilities

According to [Engelbrecht et al. \(2015, p. 1\)](#), “While the practice of inclusive education has recently been widely embraced as an ideal model for education, the acceptance of inclusive education practices has not translated into reality in

most mainstream schools.” Inclusive education has not been successfully implemented as mainstream classrooms remain uninclusive of learners living with disabilities. Findings from the study by [Engelbrecht et al. \(2015\)](#) further highlighted that, in most cases, teachers complete their studies without even interacting with learners living with disabilities. This makes it very difficult for them to deal with learners with barriers to learning and development, especially learners with disabilities, in real-life educational situations. The situation is worsened by a lack of subsidies, inclusive school facilities, and teachers who have a positive attitude towards inclusive education practices ([Donohue & Bornman, 2014](#)). This is despite the EWP6 stating that the new curriculum and assessment initiatives would mandate focus on accommodating a range of various learning needs ([Department of Education, 2001](#)). However, [Clark et al. \(2024\)](#) argue that, besides the lack of resources and other factors, in Kenya and South Africa, persistent myths and poor governance are critical contributory factors to the delayed implementation of inclusive early childhood education (ECE) for children with disabilities. This includes the belief that inclusive ECE can only be implemented gradually, depending on the availability of resources. Thus, [Clark et al. \(2024\)](#) argue that the existing gaps between commitments and practical implementation are due to governments’ tendency to exploit information gaps and misleading assumptions to postpone implementation.

Teaching children with diverse abilities is a major challenge, especially in terms of creating a friendly environment ([Chumo & Kosgei, 2019](#)). This means that inclusive facilities are the key element of inclusive education worldwide. Many educational settings in modern-day schooling display an absence of facilities and learning resources that meet the needs of diverse learners ([Jardinez & Natividad, 2024](#)). Research shows that academic excellence relies on a pleasant, relaxed, and safe atmosphere, clean air, and sufficient light ([Olugbenga, 2019](#)). It is crucial for a school to have inclusive educational and infrastructural facilities that make learning and teaching easily accessible for all learners and teachers, including those who rely on wheelchairs for mobility ([Roy et al., 2018](#)). Hence, the consideration of school facilities is critical in every school.

Physical school facilities are essential to achieve educational equity in South African schools. Insufficient or absence of key infrastructure such as accessible toilets, classrooms and ramps unduly disadvantages learners with disabilities and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This, in turn, perpetuates post-apartheid inequalities, which are common in township and rural schools in South Africa ([Government Gazette, 2010](#)). The National Policy for an Equitable Provision of an Enabling School Physical Teaching and Learning Environment requires schools to have minimum norms to bridge these disparities ([Government Gazette, 2010](#)). However, continuous shortfalls in sanitation facilities, technology, electricity supplies and safe spaces thwart promotion of inclusive learning. This has been found in some cases to result in high dropout rates among marginalised groups ([Braxton & Damoah, 2024](#)). Research further links equitable facilities to improved academic outcomes and psychosocial well-being among learners ([Mestry & Ndhlovu, 2014](#)). This highlights the link between physical facilities and educational equity and confirms that infrastructure investments are critical for realising constitutional rights to quality education for all learners.

Despite the Constitution of South Africa ([Republic of South Africa, 1996](#)) stating that every learner has the right to basic education, [Mpu & Adu \(2021\)](#) showed in their study that the inadequacy of school facilities in South Africa restricts learning. Insufficient and uninclusive school facilities harm learner progress. Therefore, appropriate facilities are needed to promote inclusivity ([Farooq & Rafiq, 2019](#)). Although there are numerous facilities in schools, this specific study mainly focused on the perceptions of teachers on the inclusiveness of classrooms and toilet facilities.

Teachers’ Perceptions of the Inclusiveness of School Facilities

How teachers perceive the inclusiveness of facilities starts with their understanding of inclusive education. According to [Lipson \(2023\)](#), teachers’ perceptions of the inclusiveness of school facilities, for example, inclusive classrooms, have an important impact on the quality of lesson delivery and support rendered to the learners with barriers to learning. A systematic review of studies from different continents but mainly from Europe, on teachers’ attitudes toward inclusive education by [Lindner et al. \(2026\)](#) revealed that secondary school teachers had varied and often uncertain attitudes toward inclusion. Such attitudes were attributed to systemic and professional barriers such as a lack of resources, training and the type of learner needs. This means that how they perceive the inclusiveness of facilities can be informed by these limitations and attitudes towards inclusive education. In Ghana, [Ahiavi & Thomas \(2021\)](#) found that most teachers viewed inclusive education as a positive educational practice and were willing to support learners with special needs included in their classrooms. This was despite the teachers’ lack of resources, training and administrative support to implement it. In Kenya, [Mucherah](#)

et al. (2024) found that educators had moderately positive attitudes about inclusion but felt somewhat unsure regarding their preparedness to implement inclusive education, especially those unqualified in special education and who had not taken additional courses in special education. Nevertheless, most participants highlighted that limited knowledge of special education and opportunities for collaboration were the main barriers to practising inclusive education.

Similar to the European studies, a study conducted in South Africa by Hugo & Mobara (2024) found mixed feelings toward the introduction of full-service schools, where some teachers had negative attitudes toward inclusive education and others felt it was a good idea. Chitiyo et al. (2026a) further found that teachers who had previous training in inclusive education tended to have higher inclusive education competencies than those with no training. This shows the critical role played by training in shaping teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. Raphadu (2021) also found that, mostly in rural schools, teachers' perceptions of the inclusiveness of school facilities were shaped by the absence of facilities to accommodate different kinds of special needs learners in their mainstream classes. Both Hugo & Mobara (2024) and Raphadu (2021) further emphasised that these perceptions are also shaped by the size of the classes, with classes as large as 52 learners in grade 3 and 50 learners in grade 1. This has become a concerning matter as movement in the class becomes difficult. Other studies also found negative perceptions towards inclusive education and a lack of preparedness to implement it among teachers due to substantial gaps in training and the lack of clear articulation of inclusive education in the teacher training programmes (Chitiyo et al., 2026b), overcrowded classrooms and the lack of teaching and learning time (Motitswe, 2025), among other reasons.

Despite limited training in inclusive education across the globe, teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education indicate some positive trends, an indication of hope for the inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools. It should be noted that many studies conducted globally emphasise teachers' perceptions of the implementation of inclusive education, leaving a gap in the literature on teachers' perceptions of the inclusiveness of school facilities, hence the aim of this study.

Challenges Associated With Establishing Inclusive Schools

Establishing inclusive schools has revealed several challenges globally. This is because inclusive education encompasses broader themes such as gender identity, religious diversity, gender-neutral toilets, and school uniforms. However, in this study, these issues are not treated as central findings of this study but only as contextual background. In India, Roy et al. (2018) noted that such challenges were due to a high number of learners living with disabilities, which makes it difficult to accommodate everyone, as well as a lack of sufficient facilities and negative societal attitudes towards inclusion. Specifically, for LGBTQIA+ learners, the prevailing school climate and their experiences of inclusion are mainly shaped by both national laws and local school practices, with substantial disparities across African countries. In many African countries, identifying as LGBTQIA+ is criminalised or seriously stigmatised (Mujugira et al, 2024), which can result in LGBTQIA+ learners being harassed, bullied and excluded in schools. Although South Africa constitutionally protects sexual orientation and legalises same-sex marriage, LGBTQIA+ learners often report homophobic and transphobic abuse resulting in withdrawal from school activities and suicide in some cases (Moyano & Sánchez-Fuentes, 2020). Furthermore, mainstream schools in South Africa frequently contribute to the marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ learners through school facilities that adhere to a binary gender framework. This is evidenced by the existence of separate male and female facilities such as toilets. These infrastructural challenges, along with a lack of adequate privacy in restroom facilities, place LGBTQIA+ learners at an increased risk of bullying and harassment. As a result, many learners may skip school or abstain from using vital facilities.

Religious diversity in South African schools is another challenging broader theme for inclusive education. Religion goes beyond Islam, incorporating other religions like African Traditional Religions (ATR). In inclusive schools, this diversity calls for the establishment of facilities that support Muslim prayer spaces, toilet facilities for Muslims, suitable attire policies and the accommodation of other spiritual practices. Although the National Policy on Religion and Education (Department of Education, 2003) mandates provisions such as prayer rooms and adaptable dress codes, numerous schools fail to recognise the needs of ATR learners who often constitute 20–30% of learners in rural Gauteng primary schools (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2024). This exclusion can be argued as disrupting cultural continuity in school spaces. Van Vollenhoven & Blignaut (2007) argue that uniform policies marginalise.

Dress codes and prayer regulations are also associated with challenges of establishing inclusive schools. They prompt human rights disputes among different faiths. This is because strict prohibitions on hijabs for Muslims and beads or animal-

skin wrist bands for ATR learners are restricted in certain South African Christian schools. Uniform policies banning headscarves or beards for religious reasons have resulted in conflicts regarding the violation of constitutional rights to religious expression, as acknowledged in policy and court rulings (Van Vollenhoven & Blignaut, 2007). This is despite the protections outlined in the Constitution of South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 1996). This situation fosters a one-size-fits-all tension that isolates diverse identities. Recent research highlights instances in primary schools where Muslim girls and ATR boys have been suspended due to their cultural attire (Thebus, 2023). School principals often justify these actions by claiming a need for neutrality rather than equity. In Kenya, comparative frameworks successfully incorporated ATR sacred groves alongside Muslim prayer spaces, which have been shown to improve learner retention (Ndzovu, 2023). This approach is also recommended by Chimbunde & Moreeng (2024) for setting up multicultural classrooms in South Africa. Such infrastructure that is inclusive of various religions has the potential to fill these gaps, as has been noted in Nigeria, where both Islam and Yoruba traditions have been successfully accommodated (Abdullahi, 2025). By focusing on Ubuntu-driven designs when establishing inclusive school facilities, South African schools can surpass uniformity as suggested by Chimbunde & Moreeng (2024), creating a synthesis of Muslim, ATR and other religious expressions that promote authentic inclusivity.

Accessible infrastructure plays a vital role for learners with disabilities in South African mainstream schools. Nonetheless, challenges remain due to insufficient resources, inadequate teacher training, and adapting and differentiating the curriculum in executing inclusive education (Chitiyo et al., 2026a). South African research shows that many schools have no wheelchair-accessible ramps or toilets, compelling learners with physical disabilities to confront obstacles that worsen their exclusion (Deghaye, 2021). Du Preez (2024) also noted a lack of sensory rooms, adjustable furniture and assistive technology in under-resourced schools in South Africa. Such facilities, which are necessary for neurodiverse learners, such as those with autism and various disabilities, are almost nonexistent. This results in reduced participation among learners with disabilities.

Thus, to promote inclusion, schools need to upgrade their facilities to include gender-neutral toilets, flexible uniforms and designated safe zones in line with the guidelines set out by the DBE that advocate equity. It is also crucial to provide targeted professional development for teachers to educate them on fostering a sense of belonging for LGBTQIA+ learners (Francis et al., 2022). These strategies should aim to bridge the gap between policy and practice, helping teachers to cultivate inclusive environments that enhance the well-being of all learners. While school inclusiveness may encompass social, religious, and identity-based dimensions, the present study examines only the physical and infrastructural aspects of inclusiveness that emerged in the interview data.

Theoretical Framework

Luhmann's systems theory was adopted in this study as it is relevant to inclusive education (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). In this theory, Luhmann (1995) advocates an inclusive system which targets societal integration in all phases. From a systems perspective, inclusiveness is perceived as a vehicle through which an educational system can achieve societal integration (Luhmann, 1995). This means that the education system is utilised as an instrument for integrating different elements, for example, inclusion of learners with different disabilities and inclusion of learners from different backgrounds or different beliefs. One of the key concepts of Luhmann's theory is communication (Mattheis, 2012). According to Forsyth (2024), Luhmann argues that with a lack of communication, social systems become dysfunctional. This means that for inclusive education to be effective, there should be decent and effective communication within educational systems. When this theory is applied to inclusive education, it suggests significant perspectives on how communication affects inclusive learning and teaching environments. The theory was employed to get a better understanding of teachers' perceptions as a form of communication for the promotion of inclusive school facilities and learners' rights.

Luhmann (1995) also talks of the concept of autopoiesis, which simply means self-production. According to Mattheis (2012), self-production refers to self-creation or self-making, which defines the capability of an object to replicate itself. This means that even once a system is interconnected with new systems, it can be modified, but within boundaries. In this study, the theory was adopted to clarify how teachers' perceptions towards inclusiveness can diverge and change in line with developing ideas of inclusive education. Even with teachers being part of a bigger school system, they might have different perceptions that can contribute to the development of inclusive school facilities. In a school background where inclusive education requires implementation, the school, together with parents, can develop their guiding principles

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants.

Participant	Gender	Age in years	Teaching experience	Qualification
Participant 1	Female	33	6	Bachelor of Education Honours Postgraduate Diploma in Inclusive Education
Participant 2	Male	46	12	Bachelor of Arts General Postgraduate Certificate in Education
Participant 3	Female	35	8	Bachelor of Education Honours Advanced Diploma in Remedial Studies
Participant 4	Male	59	22	Higher Diploma in Education

regarding inclusive school facilities, but within the restrictions of the DoE policies regarding inclusive education.

Another vital concept in [Luhmann's \(1995\)](#) theory is the degree of complexity through which systems function and interrelate. There are several complexities that the social systems deal with. These can be influenced by the absence of subsidies to deliver inclusive resources for different learner needs, or undesirable perceptions among different stakeholders toward inclusion. The theory was therefore applicable in this study to explain whether the teachers' perceptions posed any complexity to the concept of inclusive school facilities.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach anchored in the interpretivist paradigm was applied to investigate participants' perceptions of the inclusiveness of school facilities and to understand the meanings participants assigned to their perceptions ([Tuffour, 2017](#)). This approach enabled the researchers to collect in-depth data from the participants regarding their perceptions ([Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023](#)). The study used purposive sampling to select four teachers, two male and two female, from one mainstream primary school. All participants had worked at the school for over five years; hence, they could answer the interview questions. The study applied a generic qualitative research design, which allowed the researchers to focus on participants' perceptions and real-life experiences while maintaining methodological rigour ([Ellis & Hart, 2023](#)). The study used semi-structured interviews and observations to collect in-depth data. These methods aligned well with the subjective nature of the interpretivism paradigm ([Maree, 2015](#)). Table 1 below shows the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used as the main data collection method. They were deemed most suitable for this study as they provided in-depth data on the inclusiveness of school facilities while addressing the aim of the study ([Kallio et al., 2016](#)). This method allowed the researchers to engage with participants individually and privately ([Ruslin et al., 2022](#)). Semi-structured interviews also enabled the researchers to follow up on verbal and non-verbal responses such as silence or laughter ([Kakilla, 2021](#)). An interview schedule was developed through piloting with two non-participant teachers whose feedback was used to refine questions to ensure clarity and content validity ([Kakilla, 2021](#)). This was followed by thorough training for the interviewer, who is the first author, on probing participants and capturing non-verbal cues such as silence or laughter ([Kakilla, 2021](#)). The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, transcribed verbatim and member-checked by participants for accuracy to increase credibility ([Creswell & Poth, 2018](#)).

Non-Participant Observations

This study also used non-participant observations to collect data to complement and verify findings derived from individual interviews. They also allowed direct verification of reported challenges and successes against physical realities, reducing self-reported participant biases ([Ciesielska et al., 2018](#)). Using [Braun & Clarke's \(2021\)](#) reflexive guidelines, a structured observation tool was developed and used to systematically note facility features, usage patterns and interactions during several school visits. Field notes were recorded immediately to reduce observer subjectivity and ensure rich confirmatory data ([Angrosino, 2007](#)).

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using the five steps of the spiral data analysis process of [Creswell & Poth \(2018\)](#). The same method was used to analyse both interviews and observations, and findings from the two data sets were compared to find common themes to ensure trustworthiness ([Mncube & Dube, 2019](#)). Step 1 involved managing and organising the data, where raw data from interviews and observations were compiled and prepared for analysis. This was done by organising them into folders with each data set labelled using participants' codes to maintain confidentiality and anonymisation. Step 2 was reading, memoing and generating initial codes. At this point, data transcripts and field notes were read several times for familiarisation and to get a general picture of what the data entailed. Notes were taken on emergent patterns to generate initial codes using the open coding approach. Data were segmented without preconceived categories, and there was constant checking of raw data to verify the codes. Coding was independently done by the two researchers achieving 92% inter-rater reliability using Cohen's kappa ([McHugh, 2012](#)).

Step 3 involved describing and interpreting findings through detailed categorisation and themes ([Creswell & Poth, 2018](#)). This was achieved by clustering initial codes into broader categories and tentative themes, which were backed by verbatim extracts from participants. Meanings were interpreted within the context of the observations and how participants responded verbally and non-verbally to the questions. Step 4 was representing and reporting findings. At this point, themes were synthesised into coherent narratives, and the interview and observation data were compared to identify any contradictory cases. Literature on inclusive education was used to validate interpretations, and excerpts were checked for trustworthiness through member reflection. Step 5 was the last step, which involved interpreting the meaning of the data. Data were interpreted, linking themes to theory and reviewed literature. Practical implications and recommendations were made based on the findings. This process of data analysis enabled flexibility and allowed continuous revisitation of the data, which enhanced the rigour of the findings ([Creswell & Poth, 2018](#)).

Ethical Consideration

The researchers were granted ethical clearance to carry out the study from the University of Johannesburg Ethics Committee and further obtained permission to conduct the study from the DoE, Mopani East District Office. The participants were provided with the purpose and details of the study before signing the informed consent forms. They were also allowed to ask questions about the study. The researcher assured the participants of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without giving reasons and with no negative consequences. The researchers did not use participants' names to report findings, but rather used codes to identify them, such as Participant 1 to Participant 4.

Discussion of Findings

From data analysis, three themes were identified, namely: (a) teachers' understanding of inclusive school facilities; (b) perceptions of teachers on the inclusiveness of toilets; and (c) perceptions of teachers on the inclusiveness of classrooms.

Teachers' Definition of Inclusive School Facilities

Participants were asked to define what they understood about the inclusive school facilities. This was to get an idea of participants' understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Most participants defined school facilities as non-discriminatory towards learners and teachers. According to participants, inclusive school facilities were those that accommodated all learners and teachers regardless of their disabilities or differences. For example, Participant 1 said: "I think it's a condition in which all learners or the process that all learners with diverse needs ... need to be accommodated." Participant 3 also said: "Inclusive facilities must mean the school facilities are ready to accommodate all learners ... with their different needs and their different learning abilities, and their needs." Participant 4 defined inclusive school facilities in the same way as the other participants, but included the right to education: "Besides their skin colour, besides ... where they are coming from. The same boys and girls, they can go to the same bathroom."

Although some responses were somewhat vague, the above responses indicate that participants understood what inclusive school facilities meant, as they all cited the idea of non-discrimination. They highlighted that school facilities, if they are to be defined as inclusive, are supposed to include all learners despite their differences. These responses indicate that teachers understood inclusion not just as physical access, but as a rights-based commitment to social justice concepts

such as fairness, dignity, and participation. Participant 4 specifically expanded this understanding by linking inclusion to equality across race, origin, and gender. This suggests that inclusive facilities must consider both access and social belonging. This interpretation is significant because it highlights that teachers conceptually recognise inclusion, despite the school's actual infrastructure not fully reflecting these values. These perceptions further show that the issue is not a lack of conceptual awareness among teachers, but rather the mismatch between inclusive ideals and the school's material and organisational capacity to realise them.

The findings above align with a study conducted by [Nini \(2022\)](#) in Texas, which indicated that teachers understood inclusive education and had information on what an inclusive classroom should look like. Contrary to current findings, a study by [Phillips \(2021\)](#) in Northwestern Iowa found that most teachers had no idea what inclusive school facilities were. This suggests that, despite inclusive education being a global phenomenon, it has not yet reached every teacher as required.

From a systems-theoretical viewpoint, the definitions provided by teachers regarding inclusive school facilities illustrate how the educational system interprets and perpetuates the concept of inclusion through communication. The responses further indicate that the existing policies on inclusive education are well communicated as evidenced by how they align with the requirements of current policies. For example, in South Africa, guiding documents like the EWP6 ([Department of Education, 2001](#)), the South African Schools Act ([Republic of South Africa, 1996](#)), and the Constitution of South Africa ([Republic of South Africa, 1996](#)) contain information on inclusive schools and school facilities. Teachers' focus on accommodating every learner, irrespective of ability, background, or identity, also indicates that inclusive education is perceived not merely as a static policy slogan but as a functional expectation that the school environment must embody in daily practice. In the context of [Luhmann's \(1995\)](#) theory, the school is tasked with mitigating the complexity of learner diversity by structuring its facilities in a manner that facilitates participation for all. Consequently, the teachers' definitions of inclusive facilities highlight both the system's recognition of inclusion as a fundamental principle and the inherent tension between policy expectations and the school's actual ability to implement that principle.

Perceptions of Teachers on the Inclusiveness of Toilets

Participants were further probed on their perceptions regarding the inclusiveness of toilets in their school. Participants expressed their views on the nature of toilets available at the school and the facilities in the toilets. This theme showed that most participants viewed their school toilets as not inclusive, as they only accommodated certain genders and excluded learners with physical disabilities, as expressed in the quotes below.

Our toilets do not even have ramps which will accommodate learners who are physically challenged. So, they are only designed for learners who don't have any physical disabilities. (Participant 1)

Toilets at our school cannot be regarded as inclusive because the only way to the toilets is through the steps. This means that learners who are using wheelchairs or are physically not able cannot get to the toilets without the help of fellow learners. What I know is that we don't even have toilets to cater for Muslim learners at our school. (Participant 3)

Toilets at school are divided into gender. Which means they are gender-based. We have toilets for girls and other toilets for boys. We don't have toilets for learners who don't classify themselves as boys or girls. Our toilets only cater for right handed learners as they only have right-handed handles. We must also cater for left-handed learners. (Participant 2)

What I know is that our community have Muslim people, yet our toilets don't have any facilities to accommodate Muslims. So, they are far from being inclusive. (Participant 4)

The researchers' observations of the toilets in the school also indicated that they do not have rails or ramps. All toilets had right-handed handles, and there were no facilities for Muslims. This was worsened by the poor hygiene conditions of the toilets, which posed a health hazard to the learners.

The teachers' perceptions suggest that the toilets are not inclusive because they are designed for a limited range of users. This further indicates that teachers perceived the toilets as unable to support equitable access for all learners. The absence of ramps and the presence of steps exclude learners with mobility challenges and create dependence on others which undermines their dignity and autonomy. Additionally, the responses about Muslim learners and gendered toilet arrangements show that inclusiveness is also being judged in relation to religious and identity-based needs, not just disability

access. These perceptions highlight a gap between inclusive education policy and the everyday resource realities of the sampled school. This is evident particularly where toilet infrastructure appears to reflect traditional design assumptions rather than the diverse needs of learners or a deliberate commitment to universal access.

These findings align with a study done in South Africa by [Francis et al. \(2022\)](#), who found that toilets were not inclusive and were considered as possible bullying hotspots for transgender learners. [Lombo & Subban \(2024\)](#) also reported the unavailability of sanitation facilities, among other physical infrastructure. The dire picture portrayed by the current findings is an example of some schools in South Africa which have not complied with the 2020 minimum infrastructure standards, as reported by [Swelindawo \(2025\)](#). [Swelindawo \(2025\)](#) further reported that schools in South Africa were making a slow progress to comply with these standards, indicating a move from 38% in 2017 to only 43% in 2022. Although schools in Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape reported the highest increases in toilets adapted for wheelchair access and learner use of 58% and 42%, respectively in 2022, these figures still call for acceleration in improving inclusive infrastructure to avoid excluding certain learners. The researchers therefore argue that toilets in the sampled school need to be constructed with diverse learners in mind to promote the suitability and accessibility of these facilities for learners in this school. It is hoped that such improvements can contribute to positive academic performance which [Opio et al. \(2024\)](#) found to be significant predictors of learners' academic performance in inclusive settings.

From a systems-theoretical viewpoint, the remarks made by teachers regarding toilets reveal a discrepancy between the policy requirements to inclusion and the school's actual ability to implement it. The participants characterise toilets as areas that ought to support mobility, gender, and religious diversity, implying that inclusion has been integrated into the school's internal framework of meaning. Nevertheless, the lack of ramps, accessible pathways, and religious-sensitive facilities suggests that the school system has yet to convert that communication into a fully operational structure. This implies that the school has not sufficiently addressed the complexities of learner diversity, especially the multiple and intersecting needs that require simultaneous management. In the context of [Luhmann's \(1995\)](#) theory, the school seems to acknowledge the complexities of learner diversity, yet its facilities persist in perpetuating exclusion due to their organisation around narrow definition of who the typical learner is. [Luhmann's \(1995\)](#) theory further highlights that systems operate through various degrees of complexity. In the education system, this could present as a lack of finance to provide inclusive resources for schools. Thus, the lack of inclusive toilets in this current study could reflect these complexities. According to [Luhmann's \(1995\)](#) theory, the school operates as an autopoietic system that reproduces its own structures and routines. However, in doing so, the school continues to foster exclusion due to its facilities being organised around narrow conceptions of the typical learner. Thus, while inclusion is acknowledged in communication, it is not fully reflected in the school's physical context. The researchers therefore argue that learners will continue to be marginalised through these non-inclusive school facilities if no action is taken.

Perceptions of Teachers of the Inclusiveness of Classrooms

Participants were also asked to give their perceptions of the inclusiveness of the classrooms in their school. The responses indicated varying perceptions. Some participants perceived their classrooms as not inclusive of learners with different disabilities, whether they had learning or physical disabilities. They outlined overcrowding as one of the concerning matters, as indicated below.

Our classrooms are not the kind of classes with positive learning environment. The lighting is poor. Some learners don't see properly in such poor lights because of issues with their eyes. They lack pictures on the walls to enhance learning. Pictures that are based on the lesson taught can enhance the minds of the learners. (Participant 2)

Our classrooms are overcrowded, and this makes learning and teaching to be unbearable. If we had learners with wheelchairs, I wonder where will they fit; how will they move around the classroom. The noise levels are not conducive for learners with disabilities like Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and maybe autism, I think. (Participant 3)

However, Participant 1 perceived her classroom differently. She stated:

My classroom is print-rich on the walls. Flashcards are available, which I have enlarged the font size in order to accommodate learners who have visual problems. I also arrange them in groups to accommodate everybody.

The findings from the observations agreed with what the participants said in the interviews, as the classes were indeed

overcrowded and noisy. Three of the four classrooms were not print-rich. The researcher also observed that all classrooms did not have walking rails or ramps to allow wheelchair users to move around easily.

Teachers' perceptions show that inclusive classrooms are understood as spaces that should support different learning, mobility, and sensory needs. Poor lighting, overcrowding, and the lack of visual support were seen as barriers to participation, especially for learners with various impairments. Participant 1's description of a print-rich classroom and enlarged flashcards shows that teachers can also make inclusive adjustments through pedagogy and classroom organisation. Overall, the findings point to a mismatch between the ideal of inclusive classrooms and the realities of the resources available in this school. In this case, inclusion was dependent both on infrastructure and on teacher practice. These responses suggest that classroom inclusion is shaped not only by the physical size and condition of the room, but also by whether the teacher intentionally designs the environment to reduce barriers to inclusion.

These findings support those of a study done in Cameroon by [Davina \(2022\)](#), which found that teachers perceived classrooms as not inclusive, as they were not furnished with facilities to accommodate learners with different learning needs. [Lombo & Subban \(2024\)](#) also reported shortages of classrooms in the Eastern Cape, leading to overcrowding. Such classroom conditions can negatively impact the implementation of inclusive practices, reducing the learners' morale and academic success. This was true of the sampled school where the overcrowded classrooms prohibited the teachers from providing one on one academic support for the learners. The noisy and disruptive characteristics of the learners in the sampled classrooms could indicate reduced learner morale in the sampled classrooms which in turn can possibly negatively impact on their academic success. This implies that the issue of inadequate resources to accommodate learners with learning barriers remains an impediment to the full implementation of inclusive education in the selected school.

In line with the systems theory, the findings from the classroom illustrate how the school tries to convey inclusion while simultaneously grappling with the challenges of diverse learner requirements. [Luhmann's \(1995\)](#) theory advocates that inclusion should guide schools in including all learners from diverse backgrounds. The participants' accounts of inclusive classrooms as environments that ought to accommodate various abilities, learning styles, and participation needs suggest that inclusion has been integrated into the school's internal meaning-making process. However, inadequate lighting, overcrowding, and insufficient sensory support reveal that the school has not sufficiently converted this awareness into a classroom setting capable of addressing the complexities of physical, cognitive, and social differences among learners. In [Luhmann's \(1995\)](#) framework, the school functions as an autopoietic system that perpetuates its own structures, routines, and beliefs regarding the nature of a classroom, and this self-perpetuation can inadvertently maintain exclusion when the environment is structured around a presumed typical learner. Consequently, while inclusion is acknowledged conceptually, it has not yet been consistently established practically in the classrooms.

Recommendations

This study found that majority of the participants did not perceive the available school facilities to be inclusive, however, one teacher indicated that her classroom was inclusive. Participants highlighted challenges of facilities which did not accommodate learners with physical disabilities, learning difficulties, and different religious beliefs. For example, over-capacity in classrooms meant that learners using wheelchairs could not be accommodated, which excluded them. This study also found that the absence of walking rails and ramps in front of the toilets and classrooms made school facilities non-inclusive. Based on the findings, we recommend that the School Governing Body and the school management team of this school take agency and organise fundraising activities to raise money for installing ramps and erecting walking rails around the school facilities. Skilled community members can also be mobilised to offer free services like building ramps and erecting walking rails to support their school.

Qualified or skilled community members in trades like electrical can give back to society by offering community services, such as fixing lights in classrooms. This can help in assisting learners in this school who struggle with lighting issues. Annual school budgets should also prioritise the provision of inclusive school facilities. Non-Governmental Organisations and local businesspeople could be approached for donations to assist in building inclusive classrooms and toilets, enabling diverse learners to be included in this school.

Given that one teacher's classroom was inclusive in terms of print-rich material, we recommend that other teachers in the school learn from this participant to improve their classroom environment. The DBE should also plan workshops

and additional training on inclusive education to equip new and experienced teachers in the school with more knowledge, ideas, and inclusive practices. This could come in handy for teachers who are keen to be inclusive of learners with different special needs, encouraging a healthy environment for teaching and learning.

Lastly, it is recommended that existing policies that promote inclusive education and school facilities, such as the EWP6, should be effectively implemented in this school. Some DoE officials, such as circuit offices, could be assigned to monitor how these policies are being implemented and assist with any implementation challenges experienced. By doing so, inclusivity, tolerance, and equal access to school facilities can be promoted in this school.

Conclusions

It is evident from this study that participants perceived their school facilities as excluding some learners. Special mention was made of learners with disabilities, left-handed learners, learners belonging to the LGBTQ+ group, and those of the Islamic faith. This indicated that the sampled school did not reflect the ideologies of diversity and inclusion in this regard. Grounded in the study's findings, it can be established that policies on the inclusivity of amenities, such as the EWP6, are not well implemented in this school by the government through various DoE authorities and school principals. Although findings of this study indicated that teachers were aware of how inclusive school facilities should look, in some cases, like accommodating learners through print-rich environments, teachers were limited in their agency to meet this requirement. Thus, continuous teacher education is required to help these teachers implement those practices that are within their reach. The South African government should continue to strive to upgrade school facilities to meet the needs of all learners so that learners are not shortchanged because of their diversity. The study was limited by its small sample size. However, we used purposive sampling to select teachers who had various and relevant roles such as the special needs teacher, a long-serving classroom teacher with 22 years of experience and a recent graduate with five years' experience and a qualification in Inclusive Education. This deliberately maximised variation in experience, responsibilities, and knowledge of inclusive education. So, the small sample covered the principal perspectives relevant to facility inclusiveness in this school. This carefully chosen sample provided rich, targeted information that reflected major decision-making and operational perspectives. This made findings more informative, specifically to the sampled school. Considering that the adequacy of sample size depends on study aim, sample specificity, and quality of dialogue, our study aimed to make practical recommendations for one school, hence we chose this highly specific sample, and carried in-depth interviews and observations which provided sufficient information power to identify practical and actionable issues. Although these recommendations can apply to other similar situations, we recommend that larger, similar studies be conducted to gain a broader picture of the prevailing situation in South African mainstream schools.

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Author Contributions

All research, analysis, and writing was conducted by the authors. The authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

There are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethics approval and Consent to Participate

All human ethical considerations and consent to participate and publish were observed in line with the University of Johannesburg Ethics Committee and the requirements of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Approval Committee which was the University of Johannesburg Ethics Committee (SEM 2-2023-078). We confirm that informed consent to participate was obtained from all participants. Consent to publish was obtained from participants prior to the start of this study.

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